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SOME SUMMER BIRDS OF ALERT BAY, BRITISH COLUMBIA*

By P. A. TAVERNER

DURING the summer of 1917, being enroute to Prince Rupert from Vancouver and having a few days to spare, I inquired as to the best available stopping place along the coast of Vancouver Island north of Comox, the northernmost station where systematic collections have been made on the Island. Alert Bay seemed the place most easy of access and here I arrived August 9 and collected industriously until the 15th.

Alert Bay is an Indian village situated on Cormorant Island, opposite the mouth of the Nimkish River off the northeast shore of Vancouver Island near the head of Johnstone Strait. Just to the north is Malcolm Island and beyond lie the waters of Queen Charlotte Sound. Cormorant Island is about five miles long and less than a mile wide. Down its center runs a rocky ridge, badly burned along its crest, but clothed with heavy timber along the shores. The village itself is situated around the bend of the bay, on the west side of the island and facing the main steamer channel and Vancouver Island opposite, about two miles away. It is a characteristic west coast Indian village of community houses and carved totem poles, fringing a board walk just back of a bouldery beach encumbered with rotting canoes, boats and garbage. Behind rise the bare, steep and stony sides of the backbone of the island. At either end of the Indian village are a few homes of a small white population, the Indian agent, missionary and those engaged in the salmon cannery or the saw mill, which are the only organized industries. Beyond the row of houses and still along the shores at either hand, the dense evergreen timber comes down to high water mark. The bush is all but impenetrable. On the slopes dense growths of moss, ferns and underbrush conceal treacherous, loosely piled boulders. Over this is laid a mass of fallen timber of large size which has to be climbed over, with unexpected pitfalls on the other side hidden by the rank damp vegetation. Through this rise great straight trunks of evergreens reaching fifty feet or so without a branch and continuing upward one to two hundred feet. The burnt ridge forms practically the only clearing on the island and this is so generally gridironed with fallen stuff as to be heart breaking to the collector. A path across the island, after climbing a break in the ridge, descends to low ground where it assumes the aspect of a canyon through the densest kind of deciduous and evergreen brush. There is a wide, sandy beach on the east side of the island. There are no farms of any kind. A few white inhabitants have small kitchen gardens immediately adjoining their houses, and an attempt had been made to plant a patch of potatoes amidst the bracken on a comparatively clear spot on the ridge, while three or four cows picked a living from between the fallen timber in a limited area adjoining.

Across on Vancouver Island the mouth of the Nimkish River opens into a wide bay revealing great stretches of seaweed-covered mud flats at low tide. The bush is heavy, as described about Alert Bay, and only to be traversed along old grown-up logging tracks or by the disused logging railroad that leads back five miles to Nimkish Lake. Small clearings exist in the neighborhood and there is a considerable amount of local slashing and old clearing so grown up with underbrush as to be impassable without a brush hook except by infinite exertion and patience.

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It is easy to see that collecting in such country is discouraging, especially during mid-molting season when birds are at their quietest. Occasional glimpses of small land birds were observed as they disappeared in the tangle where it was hopeless to follow them or from whence when shot they could not be retrieved. An occasional bird peeped on either hand along the trail and could not be further investigated. High overhead one might be aware of numbers of small birds darting about the branches, but at such range that they were usually safe from everything but a rifle.

I spent a few hours in various directions about the village of Alert Bay trying to discover some practicable ground but without avail. A couple of trips were made to the mouth of the Nimkish River, and once along the railroad to Nimkish Lake. Most of these trips were practically blank. The most productive work was on the waters of Alert and Nimkish bays. The list of birds seen or collected is not large, but as little has been published about sections hereabouts I present it for record.

1. *Colymbus holboellii*. Holboell Grebe. Three in bright red-necked plumage seen off the east coast of the island.

2. *Gavia immer*. Common Loon. Several loons seen every day, usually adults with two or three immatures.

3. *Brachyramphus marmoratus*. Marbled Murrelet. Three or four murrelets seen constantly in the bay. One noted from the cannery wharf was still in nuptial plumage, but the remainder of those seen and two taken were birds of the year.

4. *Cephus columba*. Pigeon Guillemot. A few constantly present on the bay. All seen were in full black and white plumage. None could be taken.

5. *Larus glaucescens*. Glaucous-winged Gull. Large numbers of Glaucous-winged Gulls were seen on the bay and on the tidal flats at the mouth of the Nimkish River. All plumages seemed present and an adult and a bird of the year were taken.

6. *Larus argentatus*. Herring Gull. A number of Herring Gulls were seen about the mouth of the Nimkish River. The majority were in various stages of juvenility. One seeming adult was taken but when in hand it proved to be not quite mature in plumage. On dissection it turned out to be a non-breeder. There are two types of coloration among the British Columbia Herring Gulls. One has the black of the wing tips restricted and lightened to almost gray, approaching the *glaucescens* type and described by Brooks¹ as *Larus thayeri*; the other has blue-black wing tipping and averages a larger amount of white specula and pattern than is shown by Atlantic birds. All intermediates exist, substantiating Dr. Dwight's² conclusion that *thayeri* is a subspecies of *argentatus* and the Pacific coast representative of that species. Until separate breeding grounds for these two types are discovered the logical conclusion is that *Larus argentatus thayeri* is a highly variable or perhaps a dichromatic form.

7. *Larus brachyrhynchus*. Short-billed Gull. Very common, dividing the honors in numbers with the Heermann Gull. Four specimens were taken, showing as many stages in plumage. No. 10930 is a bird of the year, very similar to the comparable stage of the Herring Gull, with dark bill, flesh-colored feet and hazel iris. No. 10922 seems to be a year older and intermediate between the last and the next; the grays are suffused with fuscous tints, it has a heavy tail bar, and the dark primaries are without pattern. The bill is dark with light greenish base, legs olive gray and the iris silvery. No. 10920 presumably shows a succeeding plumage. The mantle is pure gray with just traces of fuscous on secondaries, while the primaries are black with definite white pattern, and the tail bar is nearly lost. The dark about the head is deeper in color than in the previous bird, but sharper in detail and less suffused. Most of the plumage is fresh while the previous specimen is much worn. The soft parts are similar to the last. No. 10931 has apparently just molted into the adult winter plumage and has but a few scattered feathers of the immature. It is at least a year older than the preceding. The bill is light yellow slightly greenish at base, with red gape. The legs are yellowish olive and the iris hazel. This last item is peculiar, for unless these specimens are abnormal they

¹Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool., LIX, no. 5, 1915.

²Auk, XXXIV, 1917, pp. 413-414.

indicate that the iris changes from hazel in the young to silver in the immature and back again to the original hazel in the adult. It thus seems that the Short-billed Gull is not mature until after its third winter at least.

8. *Larus heermanni*. Heermann Gull. Very common. All plumages seemed to be present, though birds of the year were scarce. Five specimens were taken, all in worn and molting condition. I have not a sufficient series to work out the ages, but suspect that some of them are just taking on the first adult winter plumage. In summer, Herring Gulls divide into breeding and non-breeding communities, the latter consisting mostly of juveniles, approaching maturity and a few subnormal adults. These Heermann Gulls summering far north of their breeding grounds are probably of this type.

9. *Puffinus griseus* (sp?). Shearwater. On the east side of Cormorant Island I saw two shearwaters beating and wheeling along the shore. Enroute from Alert Bay to Prince Rupert, in Queen Charlotte Sound, I saw from the ship a number of similar gray birds. None came close enough for specific determination and I include them under this species hypothetically.

10. *Nettion carolinensis*. Green-winged Teal. Two juvenile males were taken in the lower stretch of the Nimkish River.

11. *Mergus* sp?. Merganser. A couple of juvenile or female mergansers were seen in the channel between Vancouver and Cormorant islands but could not be specifically identified.

12. *Oidemia deglandi*. White-winged Scoter. Seen several times flying up or down the main steamer channel.

13. *Branta canadensis*. Canada Goose. A flock noted flying up the main steamer channel.

14. *Ardea herodias*. Great Blue Heron. Quite a number seen at low tide on the flats about the mouth of the Nimkish River.

15. *Ereunetes mauri*. Western Sandpiper. Flocks containing several hundred small sandpipers were seen on the flats at the mouth of the Nimkish River, and a few smaller groups on the beach in front of Alert Bay. All taken were typical *mauri*.

16. *Ægialitis semipalmata*. Semipalmated Plover. One specimen, a juvenile, was shot from a flock of Western Sandpipers at the mouth of the Nimkish.

17. *Bonasa umbellus*. Ruffed Grouse. Two seen along the logging railroad between the mouth of the river and Nimkish Lake. A day or so later a prospector going over the same ground saw a dozen or more. The only bird taken is a female and typical *sabini*.

18. *Dendragapus obscurus*. Blue Grouse. Said to occur on Vancouver Island opposite, but not noted by me.

19. *Lagopus* (sp?). Ptarmigan. Ptarmigan are said to occur at some elevation on Vancouver Island opposite. Fannin³ only gives *rupestris* without verifying evidence for Vancouver Island, and Swarth⁴ *leucurus* on specimens taken.

20. *Columba fasciata*. Band-tailed Pigeon. Two seen in the high tree tops in the slashings near the mouth of the Nimkish River.

21. *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*. Bald Eagle. Quite common along the whole coast traversed by daylight from Vancouver to Alert Bay. This includes from near Comox northwards. They were often noted sitting on floating debris out in mid-channel. About the mouth of the Nimkish River they were very numerous and came to feed on the exposed mud flats, being seen in adjoining trees waiting for the water to fall. It is indicative of the height of this comparatively moderate sized timber, that while straight below birds that were still some distance from the extreme top I was repeatedly unable to reach them with heavy charges of no. 1 shot from a twelve gauge gun.

22. *Falco columbarius*. Pigeon Hawk. One taken near the mouth of the Nimkish. This proves to be a juvenile, and is so much darker than comparable eastern birds that I have little hesitancy in referring it to *suckleyi*. Another seen flying behind the village of Alert Bay was so obviously black that I include it under the same form.

23. *Otus asio*. Screech Owl. Several nights at Alert Bay I was serenaded by what I took to be a screech owl. The tremolo was similar to that of our eastern birds

³Catalogue British Columbia Birds, Francis Kermode, Provincial Museum, Victoria, B. C., 1904.

⁴Univ. Calif. Publ. Zoology, vol. 10, no. 1, 1912.

but differed sufficiently to rouse a slight doubt as to its identity. It was shorter and of different quality, at times suggesting the laugh of the Loon but shorter and softened. Probabilities refer it to *kennicotti*.

24. *Ceryle alcyon*. Belted Kingfisher. Very common along all shores.

25. *Dryobates villosus*. Hairy Woodpecker. This species was identified by its notes once or twice, but the bird could not be seen.

26. *Phloeotomus pileatus*. Pileated Woodpecker. Heard several times and seen once in heavy timber adjoining the village.

27. *Colaptes auratus* (sp?). Flicker. Heard in the distance several times about the village but not seen.

28. *Selasphorus rufus*. Rufous Hummingbird. Common about the flowers in the small gardens in the village.

29. *Cyanocitta stelleri*. Steller Jay. Common in the slashings near the mouth of the Nimkish, and seen several times in the deep woods along the railroad to Nimkish River. All taken are *stelleri*, but the black on the back is sootier than is shown by our other specimens from farther south on the island.

30. *Perisoreus canadensis*. Canada Jay. Said to be common at higher elevations in adjoining parts of Vancouver Island, but not seen personally. *P. c. obscurus* seems to be the form occurring on the island farther south.

31. *Corvus corax*. Raven. Said to occur rather commonly. Several times I thought I heard its hoarse voice but could not locate the croaker.

32. *Corvus caurinus*. Northwest Crow. Very common along all shores. The Crows and the tide perform the office of garbage collector at Alert Bay. Practically all the household refuse is thrown on the beach. The crows are absurdly tame and shortly the little they leave is washed away by the incoming and retreating tide.

33. *Agelaius phoeniceus*. Red-winged Blackbird. I heard circumstantial accounts of this bird's occurrence on Nimkish Lake, though on my short visit there I did not discover it.

34. *Melospiza melodia*. Song Sparrow. The only sparrow seen and not very common or so retiring in the molting season as to be seldom seen. They inhabited the densest tangles in the slashings and could rarely be induced to come out where there was a chance of finding them after shooting. Three juveniles were secured. In spite of their ragged and juvenile condition I refer them to *rufina*.

35. Swallows. No swallows of any species were seen, though all the residents spoke of them nesting about their sheds and buildings. In the face of a nearby clay cliff I noted a number of holes that looked like the work of Bank Swallows.

36. *Bombycilla cedrorum*. Cedar Waxwing. One specimen taken on top of the ridge behind the village.

37. *Nannus hiemalis*. Winter Wren. Fairly common in the densest brush but so retiring as to be seldom seen, and when shot almost impossible to find. Only one was secured, a richly colored red bird that I refer to *pacificus*.

38. *Penthestes rufescens*. Chestnut-backed Chickadee. The commonest land bird present. Parties of from four to ten were seen almost everywhere, from the dense shade of the logging road to Nimkish Lake to the open sunlight of the burnt ridge tops.

39. *Regulus* (sp?). Kinglet. A few seen in the high tree tops, but too far up and in too poor light for identification. Individuals that momentarily dropped low enough were shot, but invariably caught in the spreading fronds of the evergreen branches and could not be retrieved.

40. *Planesticus migratorius*. Robin. Several seen about the village.

Geological Survey, Ottawa, Canada, April 5, 1918.